I recently received a succinct but very important question about whether Jesus is ever mentioned by any Jewish sources of the first century.

The premise behind the question is that if Jesus was the miracle-working son of God who was healing the sick, casting out demons, and raising the dead - wouldn't everyone be talking about him, all the time? It turns out, the answer is - we don't know! We have hardly any Jewish writings from his time and place.

At the end of the first century we do have the copious and massively important historical writings of Flavius Josephus, and there is one passage in particular where he does indeed refer to Jesus. The passage is typically called the “Testimonium Flavianum” (that is, “Flavius [Josephus’s] Testimony to Jesus”). But did Josephus actually write this passage? Or has it been inserted into his work by a later scribe? Or did a later Christian scribe “touch it up” a bit?

Here is the simple but crucial question I have received.

**QUESTION:**

How much of the Testimonium Flavianum do you think is original?

**RESPONSE:**

I will put my response in terms of the broader question of Jewish sources (of any use) for the life of Jesus. I have taken this from my book *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction*...

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In contrast to pagan sources, we have very few Jewish texts of any kind that can be reliably dated to the first century of the Common Era. There are references to Jesus in later documents, such as those that make up that great collection of Jewish lore and learning, the Talmud. This compilation of traditions was preserved by rabbis living in the first several centuries of the Common Era. Some of the traditions found in the Talmud may possibly date back to the period of our concern, but scholars have increasingly realized that it is difficult to establish accurate dates for them. The collection itself was made long after the period of Jesus’ life; the core of the Talmud is the Mishnah, a collection of rabbinic opinions about the Law that was not written until nearly two centuries after his death. Moreover, Jesus is never mentioned in this part of the Talmud; he appears only in commentaries on the Mishnah that were produced much later. Scholars are therefore skeptical of the usefulness of these references in reconstructing the life of the historical Jesus.

There is one Jewish author, however, who both wrote during our time period (before 130 c.e.) and mentioned Jesus. The Jewish historian Josephus produced several important works, the two best known of which are his insider’s perspective on the Jewish War against Rome in 66–73 c.e. and his twenty-volume history of the Jewish people from Adam and Eve up to the time of the Jewish War, a book that he titled *The Antiquities of the Jews*.

Scores of important, and less important, Jews, especially Jews in and around Josephus’s own
time, are discussed in these historical works. Jesus is not mentioned at all in Josephus’s treatment of the Jewish War, which comes as no surprise since his crucifixion took place some three decades before the war started, but he does make two tantalizingly brief appearances in the Antiquities.

One reference to Jesus occurs in a story about the Jewish high priest Ananus, who abused his power in the year 62 c.e. by unlawfully putting to death James, whom Josephus identifies as “the brother of Jesus who is called the messiah” (Ant. 20.9.1). From this reference we can learn that Jesus was known to have a brother named James, which we already knew from the New Testament (see Mark 6:3 and Gal 1:19), and that he was thought by some people to be the messiah, although obviously not by Josephus himself, who remained a non-Christian Jew.

Josephus’s religious perspective has made the other reference to Jesus a source of considerable puzzlement over the years, for he not only mentions Jesus as a historical figure but also appears to profess faith in him as the messiah—somewhat peculiar for a person who never converted to Christianity.

Probably the most controversial passage in all of Josephus’s writings is his description of Jesus in book 18 of *The Antiquities of the Jews*.

> At this time there appeared Jesus, a wise man, if indeed one should call him a man. For he was a doer of startling deeds, a teacher of people who receive the truth with pleasure. And he gained a following both among many Jews and among many of Greek origin. He was the Messiah. And when Pilate, because of an accusation made by the leading men among us, condemned him to the cross, those who had loved him previously did not cease to do so. For he appeared to them on the third day, living again, just as the divine prophets had spoken of these and countless other wondrous things about him. And up until this very day the tribe of Christians, named after him, has not died out. (*Ant.* 18.3.3)

This testimony of Jesus has long puzzled scholars. Why would Josephus, a devout Jew who never became a Christian, profess faith in Jesus by suggesting that he was something more than a man, calling him the messiah (rather than merely saying that others thought he was) and claiming that he was raised from the dead in fulfillment of prophecy?

Many scholars have recognized that the problem can be solved by looking at how, and by whom, Josephus’s writings were transmitted over the centuries. In fact, they were not preserved by Jews, many of whom considered him to be a traitor because of his conduct during and after the war with Rome. Rather, it was Christians who copied Josephus’s writings through the ages. Is it possible that this reference to Jesus was beefed up a bit by a Christian scribe who wanted to make Josephus appear more appreciative of the “true faith”?

If we take out the Christianized portions of the passage, what we are left with, according to one of the most convincing modern studies, is the following:

> At this time there appeared Jesus, a wise man. For he was a doer of startling deeds, a teacher of people who receive the truth with pleasure. And he gained a following both among many Jews and among many of Greek origin. And when Pilate, because of an accusation made by the leading men among us, condemned him to the cross, those who had loved him previously did not cease to do so. And up until this very day the tribe of Christians, named after him, has not died out.
If this is something Josephus wrote, as most scholars continue to think, then it indicates that Jesus was a wise man and a teacher who performed startling deeds and as a consequence found a following among both Jews and Greeks; it states that he was accused by Jewish leaders before Pilate, who condemned him to be crucified; and it points out that his followers remained devoted to him even afterward (Ant. 18.3.3).

It is useful to know that Josephus had this much information about Jesus. Unfortunately, there is not much here to help us understand specifically what Jesus said and did. We might conclude that he was considered important enough for Josephus to mention, although not as important as, say, John the Baptist or many other Palestinian Jews who were thought to be prophets at the time, about whom Josephus says a good deal more. We will probably never know if Josephus actually had more information about Jesus at his disposal or if he told us all that he knew.

No other non-Christian Jewish source written before 130 C.E. mentions Jesus.

Clearly, we cannot learn much about Jesus from non-Christian sources, whether pagan or Jewish. Thus if we want to know what Jesus actually said and did during his life, we are therefore compelled to turn to sources produced by his followers.

If you were a member of the blog, you would get meaty posts like this five days a week, every day of the week for all eternity. Well, OK, for a long time. And going back seven years (you can access all the old ones very easily). So why not join? It’s little money and less effort, and the blog raises money for important charities helping those in need!